

# 1997

## Legislative Review

Sen. Val Stevens

Rep. John Koster

Dear friends,

For the first time in 40 years, the state Legislature in 1997 completed writing a budget by the constitutionally mandated 105-day deadline, proving that, if we just work together, we can accomplish much.

With Republican majorities in both the House of Representatives and the Senate, the Legislature was able to cooperate and pass several important bills:

- We passed \$220 million in property tax relief for you to vote on in the November election.
- We restructured our state's welfare system to emphasize temporary assistance and require work.
- We provided \$11.2 billion for public schools, colleges, and universities.
- We strengthened a 20-year-old juvenile justice law to increase parents' authority over their children and make sure punishments fit the crime.
- We passed a budget that held state spending to the lowest increase over the past 25 years.

We also worked to improve life in the 39th District. A specific proposal of interest to the district was a bill protecting part of the Lakewood School District from becoming automatically annexed by the Arlington School District in an upcoming annexation plan. A regional committee will now decide these school districts' fates.

We enjoyed all of your calls, letters, e-mails, and visits this session. Your input is of great importance to us. Thank you for the privilege of serving you in the Washington State Legislature.

Sincerely,

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## Lean budget proposal keeps check on state spending

Early in this legislative session, we asked your opinion on state spending. Here's what you told us:

- 83 percent said the state's spending lid should not be revised to allow for more government spending.

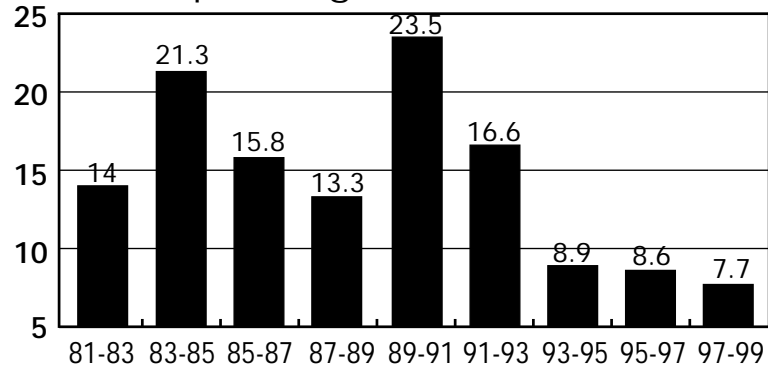
We listened to you. Working well within the limits of Initiative 601, lawmakers approved a budget \$112 million below the spending lid. This budget reflects the lowest increase in state spending growth in the past 25 years.

## Continuing strong support for K-12 and higher education

Roughly 60 percent of our state's budget each year is dedicated to public schools — K-12, colleges and universities. Our goal was to give teachers and professors more resources — books, computers, software, and other supplies — so they could continue to focus their efforts on providing the best education possible to our children. For example, each K-12 classroom will receive an average of \$458 just for supplies so teachers and schools can purchase items that fit the needs of their children.

- We allocated \$40 million to local schools for computers and other high-technology equipment.
- We authorized more than \$275 million to ensure that all voter-approved school construction projects are fully funded.
- Another \$20 million was provided for books and computer supplies.
- We allocated \$40 million to fund new enrollments at state colleges and universities.

State Spending Growth



- We granted \$28 million to support financial aid for college students.
- We added \$55 million in workforce training at community and technical colleges.
- Requires welfare recipients to work in order to receive assistance;
- Provides additional child-care assistance to help families stay on the job;
- Sets a goal to help 15 percent of our welfare families off assistance and into self-sufficiency by 1999; and
- Protects teen mothers from predatory adults by requiring them to live with their parents or in another responsible adult living situation and be actively working toward a high school diploma.

## 1997 Survey Results:

When given several options to help welfare recipients off public assistance and into the job market, 38 percent of you said you support job training and vocational training as the most effective option.

## Welfare reform puts work first

One of our No. 1 priorities this session was to transform our state's welfare delivery system from one of lifelong dependency to a job placement program designed to inspire hope and self-sufficiency.

This session, the Legislature worked with the governor to design a new welfare system that:

- Makes public assistance a temporary helping hand rather than a lifelong entitlement by limiting assistance to a five-year lifetime total;

For more than 60 years, our government policies have held families back and kept them in poverty in the name of compassion. The time has come for a truly compassionate assistance program that gives families the tools to move off public assistance, out of poverty, and up the economic ladder. We agree with the age-old proverb, "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day, but teach him to fish and he will have food for a lifetime."

If you know someone who is committing welfare fraud, please call the state welfare fraud hotline at 1-800-562-6906.



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## Stiffer punishments for juvenile offenders

In a study of violent juvenile criminals, it was reported that 70 percent had prior criminal records with an average of four prior convictions. Since the passage of the Juvenile Justice Act of 1977, juveniles have learned they can get away with committing serious adult crimes without suffering any of the adult consequences. This session, we passed a bill:

- Sending more 16- and 17-year-old serious offenders to adult court;
- Simplifying the sentencing grid to make it easier for judges to handle punishments;
- Increasing penalties for many juvenile crimes like armed felonies and drive-by shooting; and
- Transferring juvenile crimes to an individual's adult record, making these offenders eligible for "Three Strikes, You're Out," where those convicted three times of serious violent crimes, such as murder, rape or robbery, are sentenced to life in prison.

## Accountability first, gas tax increase last resort

Everyone is concerned about the increasing danger on SR 522. This project must be funded soon before one more life is lost. We both introduced bills this session requesting \$75 million to add two additional lanes to SR 522. Unfortunately, due to a lack of funding, neither bill passed all the way through the Legislature.

One of the most controversial proposals before the Legislature this session was a suggested 9-cent gas tax increase. Seven cents would have gone to state projects

and 2 cents were allowed for county and city projects. The local taxes were optional and local governments would have had to vote to approve them.

If all 9 cents of the gas tax had been imposed, our state gas tax would have jumped from 23 cents per gallon to as much as 31 cents giving us the fifth highest gas tax in the nation.

We opposed a gas tax increase in favor of a more conservative budget, which includes a performance audit of the state Department of Transportation. The department has 1,400 employees in the northwest region alone — that's one employee for every 2.5 miles of highway in the region. In our opinion, the department must spend its existing dollars more responsibly before requesting a tax increase. Meanwhile, the urgent need for improvements to SR 522 grows.

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### Survey Results:

64 percent of you said you oppose a higher gas tax to fund increases in transportation needs.

19 percent supported a gas tax increase.

17 percent did not respond to the question.



## Sen. Val Stevens: Improving our schools, protecting families

### Student records and family privacy

The issue of student records is troubling to many parents. On one hand, parents are frustrated when they request to view their children's school records and are denied. On the other hand, some parents are concerned that private family information is accessible to strangers through their children's school records. The federal government has already addressed this issue and Senate Bill 5603 further clarifies this policy in Washington state.

Senate Bill 5603 grants parents and guardians access to all of their children's school records; and

Protects students' and parents' privacy by requiring written parental consent before student records are released.

This bill was passed by the Legislature with bipartisan support and was signed by the governor.

### Keeping investigative power with local police

For the past several sessions, I've worked to improve our child protection system by introducing family-friendly legislation and by serving as the chairperson of the Subcommittee on Child Protective Services (CPS) Investigations in the House of Representatives.

One of the recommendations the subcommittee made was to limit CPS' investigative power. In hearing after hearing across the state, we heard tales of overworked



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caseworkers struggling to conduct investigations with too little staff and too little experience.

This session, I added an amendment to a Criminal Justice Training Commission Reform Bill which requires the commission to provide an intensive training session on the investigation of child abuse and neglect cases. This is one step toward removing power from CPS and returning it to the police where it belongs.



**Sen. Stevens meets with Snohomish County businesspeople to discuss economic development.**

### Helping troubled families stay together

Sometimes in Child Protective Services (CPS) cases, a parent is removed from the home on suspicion of abuse or neglect, then required to undergo treatment before returning to the home. As part of this treatment, a person may be required to admit guilt — even if they are not guilty and even if they have not been convicted of any crime.

Senate Bill 5512, which I sponsored, says that unless a parent, custodian or guardian is convicted of a crime for acts of abuse, they

cannot be required to admit guilt as part of their treatment. This bill becomes law July 27, 1997.

Another problem facing troubled families is when children are taken into CPS' care because they've been abandoned, they've suffered abuse or neglect, or they have developmental disabilities and cannot be cared for in the home. After 75 days, the family participates in a fact-finding hearing to determine whether the children should continue under CPS' care or be returned to the home.

Currently, the law determining whether or not the child stays out of the home relies on a lower standard of evidence. One of my bills, Senate Bill 5491, requires the court to use a stronger standard of "clear and convincing" evidence to decide if a child should continue to remain out of the home. This new

law goes into effect on July 27, 1997.

### Protecting family privacy

False reports of abuse and neglect can tear a family apart. Unfortunately, that's not where it ends. Few people know that the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) keeps a computer record of this allegation on its case and management information system (CAMIS) to conduct future background checks on individuals whether or not the charge is ever found to have merit.

This session, the Legislature passed and the governor signed a bill, which I sponsored, directing DSHS to purge its records, after six years, if the information in the files is related to unfounded reports and no new report has been received during that time. To contest a record before the six years are up, a person can file a written response to be placed along with their record until it is purged. My original bill required the department to purge files after two years. I hope to revisit that idea in the future.

Gov. Locke vetoed a provision requiring DSHS to report on the number of unsubstantiated reports it purges over the years. This is an important oversight tool for legislators to use in assessing the number of records purged and the frequency of false child abuse reports. I've joined two other senators in asking DSHS to consider conducting the report regardless of the governor's veto.

### Increasing DSHS accountability

According to a Seattle Times report last fall, more than 100 children died in 1995 while under the watch of state social workers or shortly thereafter. At least 52 of these children were in open case files at Child Protective Services (CPS) at the time of their deaths.

Some of the rest had received attention from either CPS, Child Welfare Services, or Family Reconciliation Services within a year of their deaths. Others lived in state-licensed care such as foster homes. Nearly all these deaths were officially ruled natural or accidental. However, the Times study found that at least one-third of these deaths may have been preventable.





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This session, I sponsored a bill increasing DSHS' accountability to the public, consistent with recent changes in the federal law. Senate Bill 5770 increases the amount of information available to the public in cases of child abuse and neglect, especially in cases where the child dies. This information may be withheld only when DSHS determines it is in the best interest of the child. This bill passed the Legislature with bipartisan support and the governor has signed it into law.

## Rep. John Koster: Fighting crime, cutting government waste, meeting constituents' needs

### Tough on crime, protecting our children

We've already discussed juvenile justice reform which includes treating as adults those 16- and 17-year-old criminals who commit the most serious offenses. Stricter, more certain punishment for violent repeat offenders, combined with prevention and rehabilitation programs to help youngsters get back on track before they become repeat offenders will restore respect for the law and reduce juvenile crime.

Another crime-fighting measure that passed both houses was House Bill 1176, my bill to add first- and second-degree rape of a child to the definition of crimes that qualify for the "two strikes, you're out" law.

This was taken out of the original two-strikes bill passed last year

which imposes a life sentence on persistent sex offenders with two convictions.

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### Survey Results:

Roughly 88 percent of those surveyed said people convicted of rape of a child should be sentenced to life in prison after the second offense.

### Improving education, school discipline

Education reform emphasizes teaching basic skills such as reading, writing and math to make sure every public school graduate has the tools to succeed. We gave teachers authority to control their classrooms, allowing a return to discipline and accountability, and passed other measures that will improve K-12 education in many ways. We increased enrollment for community colleges and four-year universities and strengthened financial aid programs.

The governor has already signed House Bill 1081, my bill to ban smoking and use of tobacco products on school property. We were sending out conflicting signals by maintaining a double standard, telling kids they shouldn't smoke and then allowing them to smoke at certain locations on school grounds. Representatives of the American Cancer Society, the state Department of Health, and the American Lung Association joined me in supporting this bill.

### Streamlining state government

Another bill signed by the governor, House Bill 2264, eliminates the state Health Care Policy Board and

transfers responsibility for the board's main function to the Department of Health (DOH). I sponsored this bill as a common-sense move to further the Legislature's intent to streamline all functions of government.

The only function of the board not already performed by another agency was oversight of anti-trust issues, a function that can be handled easily by the DOH.

During the past four years, the board was allocated more than \$8 million and hired more than 20 full-time staff members to complete a series of studies that could have been contracted out at a much lower cost.

The Health Services Account, which funds the board, faces a \$180 million deficit for the biennium.

That money could be better spent supporting the state's Basic Health Plan for low-income working families.

### Caring for constituents' needs

When people in the 39th District need help, they know we will listen to their problems and provide whatever assistance we can. When the superintendents of the Arlington and Lakewood school districts asked us to sponsor legislation to prevent school districts in areas being annexed from being absorbed into the expanding city's districts, we responded with House Bill 1120 and Senate Bill 5071. My bill passed both houses and was signed by the governor. Although it only makes a small change in the state law, this bill made a big difference to the teachers and kids in the Lakewood School District who would have been annexed without it.



Sen. Val Stevens

Rep. John Koster



Rep. Koster explains the workings of state government to a group of schoolchildren from his district.



### 39th District friends visit Olympia

Your visits to Olympia always remind us of home. If you can give us enough notice, we will try to make time to meet with you.

This session, we met with students from area schools, home school groups, school district officials, businesspeople, and families in town to visit the Capitol.

Please do not hesitate to contact either of our offices anytime you plan to be in Olympia. We promise to help you make the most of your trip!

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